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SUBJECT: Uganda refugee official on Kenyan, Sudanese and Congolese refugees

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On April 18, 2008, RefCoord met with Carlos Twesigomwe, Commissioner for Disaster Management and Refugee Affairs, Office of the Prime Minister, Uganda. The Commissioner reaffirmed his government's commitment to Kenyan and Congolese refugees in its borders and praised UNHCR efforts to repatriate Sudanese. He said Uganda was ready to participate in preliminary discussions on Congolese repatriation, but cautioned that barriers lay in the path to a final Uganda-DRCongo-UNHCR agreement on Congolese repatriation. Commissioner Twesigomwe appeared to be exceptionally well informed on the status of refugees in Uganda.

Kenyans: Move to a settlement in Uganda's interest

¶2. (SBU) Twesigomwe explained that he lobbied his Minister Musa Ecweru, Minister of State for Disaster Management and Refugees, for the March 2008 relocation of Kenyan refugees from their transit site to a permanent settlement. He said that refugees expressed to him their desire to begin their lives in Uganda, as they waited for peace to return to their communities in Kenya. The Commissioner opined that national political settlements meant less to the refugees than did regional compensation for losses, and assurances of security in their villages and towns.

¶3. (SBU) The delay in moving the refugees to a settlement had been the result of a political decision, not a humanitarian one, according to Twesigomwe. The government acceded to a request from the Government of Kenya, to postpone the move to April, to allow the refugees more time to deliberate before moving them away from the border. The Commissioner said he had objected to the decision because the transit site was unsuitable for refugees in the long term, and the refugee presence would eventually become a burden or health threat for the local community, creating enmity between the populations.

¶4. (SBU) Initially, the political concerns took precedence over humanitarian considerations, and the Ministry delayed the refugee relocation. However, Twesigomwe committed himself to "convince" the Minister to hold to the end of April deadline for the move.

Sudanese: Returns cost Uganda resources/services

¶ 15. (SBU) Twesigomwe was encouraged by the pace of the voluntarily repatriations of Southern Sudanese from Uganda. He said the refugees were initially suspicious that UNHCR and Uganda were delaying their return home for political reasons, in collusion with the Khartoum government. Southern Sudanese diplomats had fed that suspicion in their contacts with refugee leaders. However, there never had been a Government plot against refugee returns. Now that UNHCR was moving 3,600 refugees per week, the refugees had stopped their protests.

¶ 16. (SBU) According to Twesigomwe, the Government of Uganda expected to have good relations with Southern Sudan, and the people-to-people contact in the refugee hosting areas would be the basis for future economic and social ties. Although he hoped for close economic ties with Southern Sudan, the Commissioner was concerned that repatriating Sudanese were buying Uganda's food and charcoal, and exporting those commodities with them as they returned home, while Uganda experienced the early stages of a food shortage. Twesigomwe planned to raise this trade with the ministers responsible for agriculture, commerce, and customs.

¶ 17. (SBU) The Commissioner said the successful repatriation had another negative aspect for Uganda. As part of the operation, UNHCR reduced resources dedicated to the Sudanese refugees, and handed over responsibility for key services to the Government of Uganda. The Commissioner was unhappy over what he

described as UNHCR's "rush" to hand over to the Government health and education services in refugee camps. Twesigomwe complained that UNHCR and its partners designed and executed the handover without informing the Government. He and his office developed their own plan for post-refugee services in affected areas. However, UNHCR had never inquired if the Government had its own ideas about what should happen once the refugees repatriated.

¶ 18. (SBU) With unusual candor, the Commissioner said, "We want money," in response to how UNHCR could better manage the hand over. According to Twesigomwe, the local government did not have the resources to provide health and education services to refugees and the local population as well. If UNHCR could no longer provide these services, they should transfer resources to the GoU so that local government could use UNHCR funding to support refugees.

Congo: Talking about repatriation talks

¶ 19. (SBU) The Commissioner had learned from his Minister of State that the Tripartite-plus process encouraged talks between DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda on the repatriation of Congolese refugees. Twesigomwe supported the idea of preliminary talks. However, he pointed out that two barriers stood in the path of a UNHCR-Congo-Uganda tripartite agreement. First, in a recent survey, Congolese refugees had overwhelmingly rejected the idea of return to DRC. He opined that the Congolese reticence made good sense given the uncertain political situation in the Kivus.

¶ 10. (SBU) The second barrier to a repatriation agreement was the continued arrival of Congolese refugees in both Rwanda and Uganda. "How can we conclude an agreement on repatriation when refugees are still coming," he asked. Twesigomwe said that

the violence in DRC continued, and had even crossed the border briefly into Uganda when armed fighters raided Uganda border villages for food.

¶11. (SBU) Returning to the theme of resources, Twesigomwe expressed the concern that once nations begin speaking of repatriation, UNHCR and donors might begin to reallocate resources away from Rwanda and Uganda and toward DRC. Such a move would be disastrous for the nations that had hosted refugees, Twesigomwe said. He explained that UNHCR and donors should consider all the effects of a refugee crisis on the host country, as well as the eventual care of the residual refugee population left behind after a repatriation exercise. The Government of Uganda would want assurances that agreeing to a tripartite agreement would not mean a lessening of the international commitment to Uganda.

¶12. (SBU) Comment: The Commissioner's position on a tripartite agreement with DRC seemed mildly negative. The questions he raised are valid. UNHCR confirmed that an intention survey conducted among Congolese showed a marked unwillingness to go home. The survey also showed that events in Kinshasa were not relevant to refugees' decisions to return home. UNHCR plans another survey in preparation for the preliminary tripartite discussions. No matter what the result, swaying the refugees would be a matter of reassurances from their specific areas of return, rather than demonstrated goodwill on the part of Kinshasa.

¶13. (SBU) Comment continued: Commissioner Twesigomwe's comments on UNHCR handover plans in Uganda were disingenuous. In 2007, RefCoord and UNHCR spoke at length with his office, local government, members of Parliament, and the offices of the responsible Ministers about the methodology of the handover of health services. At that time, the government was keen on the idea, hoping that UNHCR would close out its partner, IRC, and funnel all assistance through the GoU. Instead, UNHCR followed a transparent plan, using local government--the

actual service provider, to take over aspects of the health and education operations in the settlements previously managed by partners.

¶14. (SBU) Government performance in the health sector has shown weaknesses in health administration. However, the GoU had over one year to prepare to accept those functions from UNHCR. End comment.
Browning